



Photo: Caroline Greyshock

BY BR

NEW YORK

Latin music has never sounded so vibrant and as diverse as it does today. Influenced by American, Mexican-American, and Caribbean styles, LA has become a hotbed for the Plugz, the Zados, and the coming of a new salsa scene. In the conditions of a Cuban dance, it's a different story. As a musical renaissance centered on Ruben Blades...

Blades has expanded his horizons beyond salsa and became the godfather of his own sound. Part trombonist, part singer, he's come to the top of the string of international albums. But his entrenched sound is still very traditional, arranged by Cuban-born Blades. With his first album, he recently released a new Blades repertoire with a section with electric guitars, a voice, and songs about political change.

"I don't write political songs," Blades says. "I write about what has been changed—about the consequence of the man songs, and a human..."

"Disappearance" is an example of his music against an urban backdrop, the

# RUBEN BLADES

# FUTURE SALSA





## BY BILL FORMAN

**NEW YORK** — A new generation of Latin musicians are developing a sound so vital it could affect popular music as profoundly as the recent influences of Jamaican, African and American Black music. While the Mexican-American sounds of East LA have been updated by Los Lobos, The Plugz, (now known as The Cruzados), and Los Illegals, a similar coming of age is lifting New York's salsa scene out of the restrictive traditions of '40s and '50s-style Afro-Cuban dance music and into the present. As a focal point for this Latin musical renaissance, attention is now centered upon the rising career of Ruben Blades.

Blades began expanding salsa's horizons back in the '70s, when he became the genre's first vocalist to write his own songs, and political ones at that. Partnered with Bronx-born trombonist Willie Colon, Blades rose to the top of the Latin market with a string of internationally-acclaimed albums. But while Colon remained too entrenched in the New York salsa sound to venture far beyond traditional arrangements, the Panamanian-born Blades felt the need to grow. With his first LP for Elektra, the recently released *Buscando America*, Blades replaces the traditional horn section with guitars, vibes and synthesizers, adds a chorus effect to his voice, and presents a collection of songs about people living in a state of political chaos.

"I don't want to be known as a political writer," Blades says. "I am writing about people. But their lives have been changed — and are being changed — due to a political situation. The songs become political as a conse-

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"I don't want to be known as a political writer," Blades says. "I am writing about people. But their lives have been changed — and are being changed — due to a political situation. The songs become political as a consequence of that, but they are still *human* songs, with a human suffering and a human expectation."

"Disappearances" is the perfect example of Blades' lyrical craft. Set against an ominous dub-style reggae backdrop, the song follows a series of

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narrators who ask after missing relatives. The attention to every day details and the helpless bewilderment of these narrators inspires an identification that strikes deeper than a thousand headlines.

Equally powerful is "Father Antonio and the Altar Boy, Andres," based on the murder of Salvadoran Bishop Romero, which Blades would like to see as his first video. "I know it would blow everybody away," says Blades of the strong imagery that would have to accompany such a video. "But then, I don't know what the reaction would be, when something as calculated as the *Undercover* video by the Stones was put out, and they don't have the slightest idea what they're talking about."

Blades is aware that if MTV had trouble with *Undercover's* Jagger-coated vision of Central America, they'd be even more wary of the real thing. "But there's a need to present an alternative, done by a Latin American, not an English group that has no idea what's going on," he explains. "But then, will it get airplay? And will it get airplay in Latin America? I mean, all of a sudden you see this image of this priest being blown away with this altar boy ... will they play that?"

"On the other hand, the alternative is ... what? To do a video like where I'm walking in the street and showing my hair and the hair on my chest and stuff? I won't do that."

What Blades will do is record a 12" single, a Beatles cover he hopes his friend Joe Jackson will assist on, and another LP for Elektra which will be his first in English (*Buscando America*

ours as anybody else's. Why should we have our own ghettos in terms of music? It's ridiculous. In the cities, everybody's listening to what everybody else is doing in the pop culture, and here we are still clinging to this 1940s outlook on life through music. I don't live in 1940 ... I'm in 1984."

Blades points out that he's not "crossing over" in the search for Vegas that has inspired other Latin artists. "Right now there are people who never had any contact with English speaking music all of a sudden doing it more out of a commercial need than out of a real spiritual reaction. 'It's a way to reach a major audience,' as they put it. But I have a major audience right now in Latin America. I like to communicate as much as I can, but I'm certainly not going to sacrifice myself in order to appeal to a current trend."

Blades also favors non-Latin artists using Latin forms, as on recent Joe Jackson albums or Laurie Anderson's new album, which features Latin percussionist Daniel Ponce. "If you are sincere about what you do, you just exteriorize and record the way you feel," he says. "I wouldn't see anything wrong with The Police trying to present a Spanish speaking song, because they are musicians and they would like to present that if they feel it. What I would criticize is The Police trying to rip off a Latin American situation in order to attain commercial gain. And this whole business seems to be oriented in that direction."

Blades' preference for combining musical cultures stems from the radio of his youth in Panama, which would feature Domingo, Tito Puente and

But these influences would have to wait several years to come out in Blades' music. First he had to settle his love affair with rock and roll: "The first group I ever joined was a rock and roll band called the Saints. We used to cover everybody. Gene Vincent. A lot of Beatles songs, of course ... you couldn't escape that. The Byrds. Bob Dylan. Anything we heard that we liked."

Blades' memories of Panama run the gamut from drinking and dominoes in the local bar to first hand views of the 1968 coup d'etat. "All of a sudden it came over the radio," he recalls, "a statement saying there'd been a coup. My friend and I went over to find out what the situation was in the city, which wasn't a real smart thing to do. There was a lot of confusion. The army was in the streets, and I remember an unmarked car pulling up next to us and giving us the look over. Thank God we don't have the kind of military in Panama that exists in Central America, or like the *pinocenti* in Chile. As far as armies go, ours is pretty much popular-based."

Blades plans to return to Panama some day, but as more than a pop star. "I would like to re-establish my credentials as a professional," says Blades, who already has a Panamanian law degree and will begin attending Harvard in the fall to get the American version. "When you take into consideration that 50% of the population of Panama is 21 years old or younger, and that I have placed in polls among the three most popular figures there, I'd say I have a good chance ten years from now running for public office."

you're in the middle of the equivalent of Rodeo Drive and you move three steps in the other direction and you're right smack in the middle of the Dominican neighborhood."

The streets of New York are heard directly on Blades' song "G.D.B.D.," which stands for the Spanish equivalent of "People Awakening in a Dictatorship." Submerged under the vocal line, the story of a man's early morning routine that could be about anyone except that he turns out to be a member of the secret police, is an other-worldly mechanical whirring sound, made by a musical sculpture commissioned by the city and hidden beneath a cement island near 45th Street. Blades discovered the sound by accident after a late night recording session, and decided to record it on a portable Sony. "I was going to do it late at night," he recalls, "But I kept falling asleep. Finally I decided some city sounds might also be in order, so I went there at one o'clock in the afternoon. I almost got trampled to death by tourists. There I was trying to blend in, and all these people started taking pictures of one of New York City's nuts hunched over a grate recording God-knows-what. I swear there were 50 Japanese tourists just staring at me."

But the embarrassment paid off, because "G.D.B.D.," turned out to be Blades' most experimental song, and one of the most powerful as well. Still, Blades is more careful in his live presentation, judiciously mixing the new material with older favorites like "Pedro Navaja" and "Plastico," for these are the songs which built his following and to which his fans know all the words by heart.

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friend Joe Jackson will assist on, and  
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his first in English (*Buscando America*  
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to). "The next album is gonna go a lit-  
tle bit further in musical experimenta-  
tion," he promises. "We're gonna be  
working exclusively with synthesiz-  
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Blades' preference for combining  
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of his youth in Panama, which would  
mix Fats Domino, Tito Puente and  
Frank Sinatra indiscriminately. "Plus  
the fact that we had such a strong  
Jamaican and West Indian influence  
in Panama," he adds. "You had over  
44,000 people who came from  
Barbados to work on the construction  
of the Canal."

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But with Panama a decade away  
and law school looming, Blades still  
considers New York City his home.  
"New York is a constant source of in-  
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"The change is going to come from  
the new blood," Blades predicts. "But  
at this point I cannot tell you that it's a  
generalized movement, because  
everybody's very cautious. Nobody  
wants to jump the gun and then end  
up not having anything." □

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